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Evaluation

Notes for community leaders



Ontario Ministry
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Finding answers

Evaluation keeps an organization on course and prevents it from flying blind. Evaluation is simply the process of finding honest and objective answers for questions like: How well are we doing what we are doing? Evaluation is used to judge or measure attitudes and ideas, programs, projects and goals. These judgments have to be based on objective evidence and they have to be made systematically.

Good evaluation meets people on their own ground. The ways people think and the interest they take in any subject will vary with their education and background. Standards used in evaluation should be those that will put the next improving step within easy reach of the group. It would be discouraging to apply the standards of the London or Broadway stage to the productions of an amateur dramatic group at a local church.

The best evaluation is co-operative. Sharing the work of measuring progress leads all members toward deeper understanding and greater desire to improve than if some higher authority carries out the evaluation for them.

Useful evaluation considers every angle. Evaluators should consider everything related to the activities or undertaking being evaluated. The key factor may turn out to be one of the least obvious and something no one had considered.

Business-like evaluation is continuous. No community organization or committee should wait until failure looms before they apply systematic evaluation. Different techniques may be used at different stages, but evaluation should be always going on.

Effective evaluation uses frank and probing questions. Evaluation must criticize and diagnose not just activities, but also the ultimate goals. Goals we set for ourselves are not sacred. They should be reviewed periodically in the light of new experience and information. The purpose of evaluation is more than just finding out whether a desired result is, or is not, being achieved. Its aim is also to find out why a given course of action does, or does not, produce the desired result.

All evaluation leads to action. The only purpose of evaluation is to improve programs and activities aimed at goals, and to improve the goals themselves in the light of individual and social needs.

Who evaluates?

Because participation in community organizations is voluntary, it is good to think of evaluation as a group activity. Members should evaluate their own actions. No outsider should decide whether they have succeeded or failed. Outside experts are useful mainly in helping to devise methods for collecting the required kind of information and in helping the group to analyse and interpret that information. The final judgment or evaluation should be made by the group.

What is evaluated?

In a community organization, evaluation is often concerned with the organization itself, or the effects of the organization's work on its members and on the community.

The organization needs to know how well it functions. What proportion of members attend meetings regularly? How well do members participate in activities? Is the organization making full and good use of all its resources of leadership and finances? How effective are its committees?

Evaluation of activities in terms of their effect on members will help keep the programs in tune with members' needs. Are there changes in the knowledge of members or in their behavior as members, neighbors and citizens? Are they growing more mature and objective about their own and others' behavior? Harmony, or lack of it, among the members, and the effectiveness of the methods being used to deal with tensions are other factors that may be tested.

The impact of the organization on the community may also be measured. How far is the organization helping to meet community needs? Does it have an appreciable effect on the co-operation among groups?

Evaluation and goals

Before they can determine the effectiveness of meetings, programs or activities, members must have clear targets or goals. If these goals are too general, evaluation will be difficult. For instance, a group that plans a series of meetings "to promote good citizenship" will find it hard to measure any progress. But a series of meetings planned "to introduce new Canadians to community" has a well-defined target.

In setting goals there are several questions to bear in mind.

- ☐ Are the goals in line with aims, objectives and policies of the organization?
- ☐ Are they acceptable to the members concerned? Are they expressed in words members really understand?
- ☐ Are they clear enough to be practical?
- ☐ Is the idea contained in the goal in line with the way most members think? Does it set too high or too low a standard for this group?
- ☐ Are the goals attainable? Can they be measured?

Evaluation techniques

There are no hard and fast rules in evaluation. The measurement of progress is simple enough if all we have to do is collect statistics – for example:

- number of people who buy tickets for a dance or enrol in a workshop.
- number of people who respond to a fund-raising campaign,
- totals of donations by days or weeks,
- number of votes for and against questions submitted to members.

But more often than not, community groups also want to find out things that cannot be measured so easily. For example:

- whether members are satisfied with particular programs, policies or administrative procedures,
- what members think about a community or group problem,
- whether members are ready for a proposed change.

Our most valuable source of evidence in evaluating community group activities is the members' freely expressed opinions. Techniques for getting this evidence can vary from informal remarks to elaborate surveys. What is most important is that the problem should be approached from various angles so that evidence from one source may be compared with the evidence from another. This approach increases the objectivity and soundness of the conclusion.

There are many devices for getting to know the views and feelings of a group. One of the simplest is the buzz-group, a technique for involving the members in program planning. At each meeting, the members may form groups of six or eight without leaving their places. Each buzz-group chooses a spokesperson and after about 10 minutes of discussion, he or she will report the program suggestions of the group to the general meeting. It is the spokesperson's responsibility to

ensure that everyone in the small group has a chance to — contribute.

Many organizations use post-meeting reaction slips. At the end of the meeting or program to be evaluated, a copy is handed to each member so that he or she can indicate, without signing a name, reactions to specific questions. Great care must be taken in framing the questions so that they will not be answered thoughtlessly or automatically.

The answers should also form a useful basis for planning future activities. Often some form of rating scale is needed so members can register shades of opinion between “yes” and “no”, or say how much they liked or disliked a program, plan or idea. Excellent-good-fair-poor is a rating scale of four parts. A scale to rate the reaction of a group may also be divided into five parts, or three or ten, for that matter. A reaction scale in five parts might be attached to a question such as “How satisfactory did you find this lecture?”

Completely
satisfactory

1	2	3	4	5
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Unsatisfactory

1 2 3 4 5

Evaluation in program planning

Good programming is perhaps the most important single factor in the vitality of any community organization. Let's consider an example.

Suppose the chairman of a program committee is a former public health nurse with an enthusiastic interest in preventive health care. The nurse arranges a series of meetings — all lectures, on the topic in which he or she is interested. Qualified speakers are invited to lecture. The committee makes suitable physical arrangements for the meetings and gets out invitations and encloses pamphlets giving background information.

The speaker is highly trained and speaks at great length. During the first talk, the members are restless. At the second meeting, there is a drop in attendance. For the third meeting, only a handful appear. The series is an obvious failure.

Applying some of the principles of evaluation, the failure may be analysed.

- ☐ Evaluation of the plan might have shown that the method of presentation was out of line with the members' way of thinking.
- ☐ Through co-operative evaluation at the planning stage, the members would have had the opportunity to express their opinions.
- ☐ Continuous evaluation would have provided the warning signals, and suggested ways of saving the later meetings from failure.
- ☐ Functional evaluation, at any stage, could have led to a change of the program content or presentation.

Before deciding on their program plan, the committee might have asked members whether they would like a series of lectures on a single topic. If that had been acceptable, a list of topics could have been drawn up, with spaces for suggestions, and each member given an opportunity to rate the choices on

the list. The topics selected would then have been in keeping with the members' wishes.

After the first lecture, a general post-meeting questionnaire like the one shown might have been offered to the members.

Assessment of programDate.

1. Please indicate your opinion of this program

(a)

poor

fair

good

excellent

(b) Comments

2. Please give your suggestions for improvement

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Committee convenors and executive officers should apply the principles of evaluation to their own work. Their starting point is the question, "What should we be doing?" When an executive group has a clear, honest answer to that question, it may begin to collect evidence to show where they are in relation to the goal.

The effectiveness of an executive can be measured in rated answers to key questions.

- ☐ What proportion of the organization's programs are initiated by members rather than officers?
- ☐ How many members maintain their interest at a high level and participate actively in the programs?

They may use some of the methods already suggested to find out the members' opinions of their work.

An example of evaluation

Suppose a community group is planning to raise funds to purchase an encyclopedia for the school library. The evaluation process would work like this.

1. *What is the target?*

The committee with the job of fund raising will probably first survey the need, and decide which encyclopedia to buy. If the group is convinced, on the basis of facts, workers available, and other factors involved, that it can raise the \$1,000 needed to buy the fine encyclopedia the experts have recommended, they have set the goal.

2. *Where are we now?*

Once they have the goal, they have a standard against which to measure their progress. It will be important to know what results their methods are producing. A careful record of progress toward the objective will be useful in future planning.

3. *What activities will lead toward the goal?*

The committee must now decide what form their fund raising will take. They decide on a Christmas bazaar because they feel it will attract many people in the community. The committee begins the search for volunteers to provide the items for sale. After a week, the committee members report little success. An analysis of information also reveals that the Christmas bazaar will be poorly attended because other community affairs are planned for the same week. On the basis of this evidence, the committee now changes its course of action. It decides to plan for a community party after Christmas - a Valentine party in fact. The available facilities are surveyed, a program plan drawn up, publicity arranged and tickets distributed for sale.

4. *How are we doing?*

Here is where records of the effectiveness of various methods used in the past will be useful. Suppose, after 10 days the ticket sale is disappointing compared with the committee's goal and expectations. The members will have to look for possible reasons.

5. *What does the collected evidence mean?*

A study of the record of the ticket sale, comparisons with past sales, and other evidence may show that few people are talking about the project or that some large group, such as teenagers are not interested.

6. *Are we doing what we should be doing?*

More canvassers, a telephone “blitz” and posters are arranged to give more publicity. The program of the party itself might be changed to include features to attract teenagers or other groups who have not been buying tickets.

7. *Can we reach the objective?*

If it becomes clear that none of the committee’s efforts can possibly produce the needed \$1,000, the goal for the project may have to be cut down, perhaps to half. The committee would then begin to plan another project to be carried out later. The objective for the new project would be the other \$500 needed to buy the encyclopedia. The committee might decide to modify its objective in other ways. For instance, cut it by one-third and buy a less expensive encyclopedia.

Another application of the steps

For another example, suppose that at a Home and School Association meeting in November, some people are interested in setting up an adult education program. Evaluation will play an important role in the project.

Before members decide their goals, they should try to find out the specific adult education needs in the community. They should consider the local facilities and whether leadership is available. They should decide how many classes will be held

Eventually, they might offer three courses at classes held from 7:30 to 9:30 on Wednesday evenings, beginning the second Wednesday in January and ending the third Wednesday in April (15 weeks) with a minimum enrolment of 15 people in each class.

Having set their goal, the committee can measure their progress. Allowing for the Christmas rush, they have about six weeks to get the project underway. They might appoint a sub-committee to meet once a week to follow up registrations, arrange for staff and class-rooms and take care of routine details.

Now, the committee may notice early in December that there is little enthusiasm for one of the courses. Perhaps only four or five persistent talkers had originally wanted it. Meanwhile, the committee has seen that another course will require three or four leaders to take care of the numbers registering for it.

The committee must now find solutions to two problems. It can make a closer canvass for participants in the unpopular course, substitute a more appealing subject, or limit the project to the two popular courses. The association may go outside the community to find enough leaders for the over-subscribed course or they may adopt a study-group approach that requires no lecturers.

The committee may face decisions of this nature up to the week before the courses begin. As new evidence turns up, the committee will interpret it and modify decisions and actions in the light of new facts. Some association members may feel they are settling for less than the ideal goals originally set. However, only frustration will result from continuing to strive for objectives that are unobtainable on the basis of good, sound evidence.

Once the classes start, a new evaluation cycle begins. Each instructor should apply the seven steps in evaluation to find out how well the classes are working toward the goal. The evidence they analyze and interpret is made up of the opinions expressed by members of the classes. When the classes are completed in April, the committee will do an evaluation of the entire course, methods of presentation, times chosen, facilities and suggestions for next year. In short, good evaluation is a continuous process.

Use of an observer

Committees and executive officers might also ask an experienced outside observer to report after watching them in action for some time. A person who is not involved in the processes of the organization can often see more clearly than the participants.

Questions the observer would ask are:

- Does the group understand its purpose?
- Is the group progressing toward its objectives? If not, why?
- Is the group making the best possible use of all the resources and facilities available to it? They may “belong” to the community and others, but can be shared.
- Does the leadership of the organization help all members to participate and to take increasing responsibility?

The observer's report should be presented frankly and objectively. It is not necessary to refer to people by name or to criticize individuals. The observer's responsibility is to describe the group process as he or she saw it. The group itself can draw the conclusions about the weakness or strength of its own procedures.



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